

Home / News / Local

Spotted Dog Ranch Proposal spurs reaction

- Story
- Discussion

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By Pat Hansen for The Montana Standard mtstandard.com | Posted: Sunday, July 18, 2010 12:15 am | (0) Comments

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DEER LODGE - A proposal to purchase the \$16.6 million Spotted Dog Ranch spurred mixed reactions at a recent standing-room-only public hearing in Deer Lodge.

The state wants money from the Natural Resource Damage Program to buy the 27,616-acre Spotted Dog Ranch owned by Y-T Timber, also known as RY Timber, and under lease by the Rock Creek Cattle Co.

The property, located south of Avon and Highway 12, and northeast of Deer Lodge, is intermingled with a "checkerboard" of 10,260 acres in state trust land managed by Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and is bordered on the east by national forest.

The area of extensive native grasslands and rolling foothills provides grazing for cattle as well as year-long habitat for wildlife species including elk, antelope, mule and whitetail deer, moose and many smaller species.

In addition to the wildlife, 2,000 cow-calf pairs have grazed the Spotted Dog and state lands for many years, including this summer.

Mike Thompson of Missoula, Region 2 wildlife manager for the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, said fish and wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities are increasingly compromised in Montana as private lands are subdivided or purchased by parties who do not allow public access.

"This ranch could also be subdivided so this is a unique opportunity to use funds from the settlement with ARCO to conserve key habitats," he said.

If the purchase is OK'd, the area would be a Wildlife Management Area. Seasonal public access to 38,000 acres of previously inaccessible lands will provide recreational opportunities, like hiking and hunting. Motorized transportation would be restricted to the main roads, and a Dec. 1 to May 15 closure would protect wintering and calving big game. There are no plans for outfitting, trapping, firewood cutting or snowmobiling (except for the groomed trail on the east side that accesses the national forest).

FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

The \$16.6 million request is based on the appraised value of \$15.2 million (approximately \$550 per acre); \$1.2 million for five years of operations and maintenance, and \$148,869 for the cost of a 10-year lease agreement with the state. FWP will contribute \$29,269 in in-kind services as matching funds for the project.

Thompson said the state and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation have tried for a long time to get a conservation easement on the property, but money was a problem and owner interest is gone.

"Now we have a willing seller who has a deadline," Thompson said. "Tonight we are hearing some issues that need to be addressed, but I'm not finding any issues we cannot handle."

Jim Flynn, a former FWP director and past chairman of the NRDP Citizens Advisory Committee, said he opposed using Natural Resource Damage Program money to buy the land saying the priority should be restoration.

Flynn also questioned the department's ability to maintain the property in the future. "Thirty years ago FWP was land poor and needed money," he said. "To correct that, a trust fund was set up, with interest, to maintain department properties. Now you are taking on another 28,000 acres."

Darlene Edge, state land agent, said Rock Creek Cattle Co. has an option to purchase the property from Y-T Timber. The company will exercise that option and then sell the property to the state, she said.

Asked how much Rock Creek Cattle Co. is paying for the land, Edge responded she believed it is \$9 million. She said the \$15.2 million being paid by the state is the certified appraised value.

Some felt the expedited process is a "political cram down" after Thompson said the governor was first contacted by Rock Creek Cattle Co.

Because the cattle company has an option period, it was suggested the company be asked to give the state first right of refusal rather than for the state to take money from the principal of the

Natural Resource Damage Program trust fund. Doing so would allow for the grant process to proceed on its usual schedule.

The state is required by statute to pay property taxes to the county. A tax figure of \$15,000 was quoted by Edge during the hearing; however, Powell County Treasurer Lisa Smith said the 2009 tax bill on the property was \$23,407.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Three sections of privately owned property lie within the Spotted Dog Ranch, and in-holder Mary Ann Olsen asked about access, particularly after the closure date when they may need to gather cattle missed during roundup.

"Rock Creek Cattle Co. has been very cooperative letting us go through later," she said.

The state plans to exclude livestock grazing from the Spotted Dog and DNRC lands for an undetermined length of time to monitor the area. Wildlife biologist Ray Vinkey said livestock might be considered as a management tool in the future.

Adjoining landowners noted the range is considered to be in good condition now with 2,000 pairs grazing alongside the wildlife. Cattle eat tall grasses that elk do not, and the combination of grazing has been proven to be beneficial to elk habitat. They also expressed concern that old, dry grasses will increase the threat of fire and weed infestations.

Lynette Weiss asked about speculation that buffalo from Yellowstone National Park would be brought to the property.

"We don't know for sure," Thompson said. "We aren't here to buy a bison range. We're here to buy Spotted Dog. If there is ever a proposal to bring bison to Spotted Dog, there will be opportunity for public input."

Most of the marketable timber has been harvested from the Spotted Dog property. While dead and dying trees provide important habitat for wildlife, the state may choose to remove beetle-killed trees to prevent spread to unaffected or neighboring stands at risk.

Officials were urged to be aware of hunting pressure problems with opening an elk herd that has been closed 30 years.

Adjacent landowner Dan McQueary of Deer Lodge said opening the Wildlife Management Area to approximately 3,000 hunter days will "result in adjacent landowners having a lot of elk on their property and broken fences."

Thompson said hunting should take some of the pressure off adjacent landowners by reducing the size of the elk herd. He believes the open roads and large area will allow elk to scatter on the area.

McQueary responded, "I've been hunting for 50 years and two people can move that whole herd. I just want to know who to send the bill to."

Thompson agreed that during the first few years "we will have a couple of wrecks, but we'll try to adapt and help mitigate damages."

John Stavlo of Deer Lodge supports the acquisition to protect the elk wintering area, noting the development in the Helena and Flathead areas where private property has been subdivided.

Josh McGraw, a rancher from Avon, questioned why the government was buying land when the U.S. was built on private ownership.

Carl Nyman of Anaconda said he came to the meeting thinking the acquisition is a good thing, but now he isn't sure.

"It is irresponsible to spend money on anything that is not restoration. You need to prioritize the entire basin; there is a finite pot of money and when it is gone, it is gone," he said.

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How to comment on ranch purchase

The Natural Resource Damage Program is accepting public comment on the proposed purchase of the Spotted Dog Ranch until Aug. 9. Send to NRDP, Box 201425, Helena, MT 59602, or nrdp@mt.gov; or faxed to 444-0236.

FWP is taking comments through July 30 at spotteddog@mt.gov, or by mail to Region 2 FWP; attn: Spotted Dog, 3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula, MT 59804

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